



What is Christmas? by TheRealSokka

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Summary: A month after El closed the gate, Christmas is drawing near. But what is that, anyway? Everyone has their own opinion on that; but ultimately, you just have to experience it yourself to really understand all the fuss. Merry Christmas everybody!

What is Christmas?

"What is Christmas?"

A month has passed since she closed the gate, and slowly- very slowly- El's mind is beginning to realize that it is over. The gate is gone, the lab is gone, the threat is gone; it's really over. Hopper is as good a mood as she has ever seen him, even dancing around the cabin from time to time. A week ago, all her friends have come visiting, with a still exhausted Will in tow, and for a few hours it was just talking and laughing and fun. It all still feels like a dream. And she is not the only one who feels that way.

She still sees it in Mike's eyes sometimes; that worry that one day she just will not be there. She tells him that she won't ever leave them again, and he nods and he believes her- but that worry never quite goes away, she can feel it. And the truth is, as much as she wants to, she just can't promise that nothing bad will happen again.

Now, however, two things begin to take over every conversation and overshadow the past. The first is the Snowball, and just the thought of it makes Eleven's heart beat a little faster. Jim has already given his permission that she can go ("as long as you keep a low profile."), but she hasn't told Mike yet; it's supposed to be a surprise. Nervousness and joy keep vying for her attention whenever she hears the topic come up, and everything else just takes a backseat during those moments.

The other is Christmas Day, which produces a smile on everyone's face whenever it is mentioned- and leaves Eleven confused whenever she hears it. What is Christmas?

„Christmas is great." Mike responds when she asks him. "You get presents and everybody has to be nice to each other; even Nancy. It's the best day of the year- maybe tied with Halloween."

"Really?" Max comments skeptically. "For me it's the day of the year where you have to smile and celebrate with your family, no matter what. ALL your family."

"Okay." Eleven says, bewildered at the contradictory response. They haven't really cleared up anything for her.

Maybe Lucas has realized that, because he goes on to explain: "Christmas happens once a year, you see, El? It's always on December 24th, because of Jesus, and every year there are celebrations because of that. And they have all this stuff in the stores; tinsel, chocolate Santa Clauses, special toys. It's great."

"So... Christmas is this thing happening every year, where everybody has to celebrate something and buy all that?"

Dustin shakes his head in disbelief: "Wow guys, you're terrible at this. Look, El, Christmas is not mandatory; it's more about the feeling, really. You spend time with people you like, do stuff you like and just enjoy the atmosphere. It's kind of unique."

"Christmas is when you wake up early and don't even mind, because you just can't wait to open your presents." Will adds dreamily. "The house is already smelling of biscuits and you just know it's going to be a perfect day."

Now everybody has a Christmas-story to share, and soon the raptures become ever more joyful. So Christmas is something good, El thinks; and she definitely wants to try it. But how to prepare for it? During the times she is left alone in the cabin, when everyone is at school or working, she starts turning on the TV more often, searching for any clues that might help her not to embarrass herself.

"Who is Jesus?" she asks Hopper one morning over breakfast.

Jim nearly spills his morning coffee: "Excuse me? Where did that come from?"

"The people on TV talk about him all the time now. He's why they have Christmas. Why is he so important?"

The chief of police had not thought he'd have to explain stuff like that as part of pre-school world-explanation, but if there's one thing he has learned over the last few months, it's that children rarely follow your educational plan. So he tries his best to explain anyway,

which goes about as well as was to be expected ("No, Santa Claus is not a white-haired Jesus."). Inevitably, the question whether or not Santa is real soon rears its ugly head, and Hopper decides to avoid it for now by explaining that many parents simply like to dress up as him. To his great relief, his daughter moves on to her next question.

In the end, Eleven imagines she has sort of figured it out. The whole idea is still very strange for her, having never seen a real present or a tinsel-hung tree, but all these explanations have woken an almost unbearable anticipation to experience the real thing. It's November the 28th when she starts counting down the days on her wall, and every morning that she wakes up and sees the countless boxes that are still left, the wait until December 24th just appears endless. "Soon." she huffs a few times. Somehow, this 'soon' feels almost as long as the first.

When only four boxes are left, Hopper comes home later than usual one day, even for him. Upon her enquiries, he just smiles and tells her to go to sleep, making her instantly suspicious. Eleven slips under her blanket as Jim turns off the light and silently vows to stay awake through the nights to find out what he is up to.

The smell of burnt Eggo wakes her the next morning. Code Red. Within seconds, Eleven is standing wide awake in the kitchen- where Hopper is cursing and beating on the flames coming out of the toaster, which has chosen now of all days to end its miserable life. Over the ensuing chaos, El at first doesn't even notice the huge tree that suddenly fills out the majority of the cabin. Once the fire is under control, she makes a curious round around and through the branches, and emerges wearing a cloak of pine-needles and a big smile. It is a complete mystery to her how Hopper has managed to get this monster inside, especially since it would never have fit through the door, but she can't argue with the results.

They spend the afternoon decorating the tree with all kinds of strange things that Jim has fished out of the cellar. He says it's a rather makeshift construction that will probably topple over the first chance it gets; she thinks it looks beautiful, especially when they turn on the lights. And Jim promises that it's even better once there are presents lying underneath it.

It's only then that the realization hits: "I don't have anything! No presents!"

Hopper smiles gruffly. "You are present enough, kiddo." he says and ruffles her hair. It's not enough to dispel EL's bad conscience, though, so once he has gone to work, the next few hours are spend racking her brains for anything she can possibly create from the things in the cabin. To her increasing frustration, she can't find anything that would work. The rescue arrives in the form of Joyce Byers, dropping off a few homemade cakes during her work break. A desperate explanation and one good idea later, Joyce drives off again, to return with her son and a box of crayons and paper. Eleven is skeptical at first; she has never really gotten into drawing before, but to her surprise she finds that she enjoys it, and with Will's help she can soon present two suitable-for-present pictures: one of the cabin in the woods, and one of Hopper and the burning toaster, the latter of which earns a fit of laughter from Joyce. Both are well hidden by the time the chief returns at the end of the day.

And then, finally, the day is here. The boys have gotten leave to spend Christmas Eve at Hopper's cabin, and when she wakes up, he has started cleaning the room and porch, and there is a big pot roast already simmering in the oven. El helps where she can and somehow the day passes by in a flash, until it is 6 pm and all there is left to do is to wait for their guests. Eleven has put on the dress she wore for the Snow Ball, thinking that the occasion justifies it. She can't deny a certain nervousness at was it to come.

Of course, Mike is the first to arrive. Upon seeing her, he looks just as happy as right before their dance, but under the watchful eyes of the chief of police, he restricts himself to a long hug. Smiling broadly, he places a small bundle wrapped in sand-colored paper beneath the tree, and El has to muster all her willpower not to immediately open it or ask what it is.

Dustin and Lucas arrive an hour later, proudly rolling in their Christmas present. Eleven's eyes grow as wide as saucers, and the boys grin at her floored expression. "I know the convention is to wrap these things up and everything" Lucas starts explaining, "but the amount of wrapping paper would have been a little excessive, so..."

"We figured you could have this one a little early." Dustin finishes and gives her the bike handle. Eleven grips it hesitantly, afraid that she'll topple it over or something, but somehow the bike feels extremely natural in her hands. She can't seem to stop smiling today: "Thanks!"

A grinning Lucas points at Mike: "And your driving teacher is also already here, El. He's not even taking pay."

Mike evidently lights up at the prospect, but pretends to be annoyed: "I never agreed to that! Did you just make a present of me?"

"Sorry man, you were a little too big for wrapping, too."

The Byers' car drives up in front of the cabin and Joyce and Will jump out, carrying a basket between them. It turns out to contain—well, pretty much everything: cake, biscuits, candy, a salad, a Christmas wreath, some bottles of coke and one of wine ("Only for the working folk, kiddo.") and candles. Thus equipped, the evening can begin, everyone is in agreement. The following dinner is easily the best Eleven has ever had, with friendly voices around the table, delicious food and warm candlelight. But the real highlight comes after.

Mike explains to her that usually you can only open your presents on the morning of the 25th, but since the boys are expected to spend Christmas Day with their respective families, the adults have agreed to make a small exception this time and already let them open their presents to each other this evening. Mike suggests that El should make the start, and nobody denies that. Brimming with anticipation, she opens the first gift— a collection of comic books from Max. Upon seeing ELeven's confused look, she explains that those really make for good reading and promises to bring her more whenever she can stop by. El flushes in embarrassment when she thinks of how she has snubbed the older girl beforehand; now that they are actually talking to each other, she feels so very stupid. But then the boys start fussing over a new comic book that neither of them has read yet, and Max carefully keeps them at arm's length from El's present, rolling her eyes at her; and suddenly all that doesn't even matter anymore.

Mike's bundle turns out to contain a bound diary (she will have to

look up what that is later) and a photo album filled with pictures of the young Lucas, Dustin, Will and Mike on their adventures. Occasionally, their parents and siblings make appearances, too. El has to laugh at some of the more ludicrous scenes, and the others join in good-naturedly, not without a few embarrassed "You put THAT ONE in?!" from each of them in turn.

Will's gift is a collection of puzzles and mind games that keeps them occupied well into the night, while Joyce's biscuits run out far too soon for El's liking. The baker herself has dozed off on the couch, half leaning against Hopper, who doesn't seem to mind all too much. Out of curiosity, El opens one of Max' comic books, without being able to make sense of what she sees at first- but then Max and the boys are all around her, pointing at the pages and explaining this superpower and that backstory, until her head starts spinning with all the information.

Will soon follows his mother in closing his eyes; his head leant back against the sofa and a small smile playing around his lips. El feels the same smile tug at her mouth and she briefly wonders if, like her, he still has nightmares sometimes; but somehow she feels that today they won't haunt either of them. At some point during the evening, Mike has slung an arm around her shoulder, and the warmth that comes with being so near him is enough to chase away all the worries. Snuggling a little closer, her eyes fall shut to a smell she can only describe as 'Christmassy', Max' quiet admission: "I might just like Christmas." and the sound of Mike and Dustin's whispering voices as they start planning- something about a 'campaign'.

The next day doesn't start before 10am, nobody having set an alarm clock. Under heavy yawns and lots of hugs, everyone takes their leave to reap their presents from their respective families. Mike takes the moment when both adults are focused on each other to press a quick kiss to EL's lips, his cheeks flushing a tell-tale crimson; and if the day wasn't perfect until then, it is now. When everybody is gone, Eleven- the smile on her face still refusing to go away- looks over the mess of gift wrappings, biscuit crumbs and pine needles that covers the entire room; and, scattered throughout, her new collection of puzzles; already solved, comic books; already read, and the bike she is not allowed to use yet.

Hopper is looking at the same scene and gives an exasperated sigh: "Well, here you go. This is Christmas for you."

There's only one question in El's mind: "How long is it until the next one?!"

In that spirit; everyone have a great Christmas Eve and an even better Christmas Day!